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Exploring Classroom Engagement through Learner-Centered Pedagogy at Mabanutan Elementary School

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Abstract

Learner engagement is a critical factor in effective teaching and meaningful learning, particularly at the elementary level where foundational skills and attitudes toward learning are formed. This study explored classroom engagement as shaped by learner-centered pedagogy at Mabanutan Elementary School. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and analysis of instructional materials. Findings reveal that learner-centered strategies such as collaborative activities, guided questioning, differentiated tasks, and contextualized instruction enhanced behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among learners. Despite contextual challenges such as limited resources and diverse learner needs, teachers' adaptive practices and reflective decision-making sustained high levels of participation and interest. The study underscores the importance of learner-centered pedagogy in promoting inclusive and engaging classroom environments and offers implications for instructional practice and school leadership in elementary education.

Keywords: learner engagement, learner-centered pedagogy, elementary education, classroom practices, qualitative case study

1. Introduction

Classroom engagement is widely recognized as a key predictor of learning success, academic achievement, and positive learner behavior. Engaged learners are more attentive, motivated, and willing to participate actively in learning tasks, leading to deeper understanding and improved outcomes. In elementary education, fostering engagement is particularly important as early learning experiences shape learners' attitudes toward school and learning.

Learner-centered pedagogy has emerged as a dominant instructional orientation aimed at enhancing engagement by positioning learners as active participants in the learning process. Rather than relying on teacher-dominated instruction, learner-centered approaches emphasize interaction, collaboration, inquiry, and responsiveness to learners' needs and experiences. In the Philippine basic education context, policies and curriculum reforms increasingly advocate learner-centered and inclusive teaching practices. However, empirical studies documenting how learner-centered pedagogy influences classroom engagement in elementary schools, particularly in rural or resource-constrained settings, remain limited.

Mabanutan Elementary School provides a relevant context for examining learner-centered practices, as teachers navigate diverse learner abilities and contextual constraints while striving to promote active participation. This study seeks to explore how learner-centered pedagogy shapes classroom engagement at Mabanutan Elementary School, addressing a gap in localized, practice-based research on engagement in elementary classrooms.

2. Review of Related Literature

Classroom engagement is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, each of which contributes to meaningful learning experiences. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' observable participation in classroom activities, including attention, persistence and on-task behavior. Emotional engagement involves learners' interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging within the classroom, while cognitive engagement reflects the degree of effort, strategic thinking, and willingness to invest in challenging tasks (Fredricks et al., 2004). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that high levels of engagement across these dimensions are associated with improved academic achievement, positive classroom behavior, and sustained motivation to learn (Schunk et al., 2014). As such, classroom engagement is considered a critical indicator of instructional effectiveness and learner success, particularly in foundational educational levels.

Learner-centered pedagogy is grounded in constructivist learning theories, which view learning as an active, socially mediated process in which learners construct knowledge through interaction and experience rather than passive reception of information. This pedagogical orientation emphasizes instructional strategies such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, differentiated instruction, and formative feedback, all of which position learners as active participants in the learning process (Prince & Felder, 2006). Research indicates that learner-centered approaches enhance learner motivation and engagement by providing opportunities for choice, interaction, and meaningful application of knowledge to real-life contexts (Schunk et al., 2014). By fostering autonomy and relevance, learner-centered pedagogy supports deeper understanding and sustained engagement across diverse learning environments.

In elementary education, learner-centered pedagogy is particularly effective because it aligns with children's developmental needs and learning characteristics. At this level, instruction that accommodates learners' varied interests, learning styles and readiness levels promotes active participation and positive attitudes toward learning. Studies highlight that when teachers employ interactive, supportive, and responsive strategies such as hands-on activities, collaborative tasks, and guided exploration learners demonstrate increased confidence, enjoyment, and engagement in classroom activities (Tomlinson, 2014). However, the successful implementation of learner-centered pedagogy in elementary settings often depends on teachers' adaptability and contextual awareness, especially in schools with limited resources or diverse learner populations. Teacher responsiveness and reflective practice therefore play a crucial role in sustaining learner-centered instruction and engagement in elementary classrooms.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore classroom engagement through learner-centered pedagogy within a real-life school context. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth examination of instructional practices and learner responses as they naturally occurred in classrooms.

The study was conducted at Mabanutan Elementary School, a public elementary school serving learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Participants included selected elementary teachers implementing learner-centered strategies and their respective classes. Teachers were purposively selected based on teaching experience and use of interactive instructional approaches.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on learner participation, interaction patterns, and instructional strategies. Interviews explored teachers' pedagogical beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of learner engagement. Lesson plans and learning materials were analyzed to examine alignment with learner-centered principles.

Data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents were coded to identify recurring patterns related to engagement and pedagogy. Triangulation across data sources enhanced

the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

4. Results and Findings

Analysis of the data revealed three major themes describing how learner-centered pedagogy influenced classroom engagement at Mabanutan Elementary School.

Theme 1: Active Participation through Collaborative and Interactive Learning

Findings indicate that learner-centered strategies promoted active participation by engaging learners in collaborative and interactive activities. Group work, peer discussions, and hands-on tasks encouraged learners to contribute ideas and participate more confidently. One teacher shared, “*Kapag may group activity, mas maraming bata ang gustong sumali at magpahayag ng kanilang ideya*” (P4). Another noted, “*Napapansin ko na kahit tahimik na mag-aaral ay nagiging aktibo kapag may sama-samang gawain*” (P11). A third participant explained, “*Mas buhay ang klase kapag ang mga bata ay gumagalaw at nag-uusap tungkol sa aralin*” (P7). These responses show that collaborative learning enhanced behavioral and emotional engagement.

Interpretively, collaborative and interactive strategies fostered engagement by creating supportive learning environments where learners felt comfortable participating. This aligns with studies demonstrating that social interaction and cooperation enhance learner engagement and motivation, particularly in elementary classrooms where peer interaction supports learning development.

Theme 2: Increased Interest through Contextualized and Meaningful Tasks

The second theme highlights the role of contextualized instruction in sustaining learner interest and attention. Teachers connected lessons to learners’ daily experiences, local contexts, and familiar situations. One participant stated, “*Kapag ang halimbawa ay galing sa kanilang karanasan, mas naiintindihan at mas interesado ang mga bata*” (P2). Another shared, “*Mas mabilis silang makasunod kapag ang gawain ay may kaugnayan sa kanilang buhay*” (P5). A third teacher remarked, “*Nakikita ko na mas masaya silang matuto kapag naiintindihan nila ang saysay ng aralin*” (P1). These accounts suggest that contextualization enhanced emotional and cognitive engagement.

From an analytical perspective, meaningful and context-based tasks supported engagement by helping learners see the relevance of what they were learning. Research on learner-centered pedagogy emphasizes that relevance and authenticity are key drivers of sustained engagement and deeper learning.

Theme 3: Teacher Adaptability and Supportive Classroom Climate

The third theme underscores the importance of teacher adaptability and a supportive classroom environment in maintaining learner engagement. Teachers adjusted instruction based on learners’ responses, abilities, and attention levels. One teacher explained, “*Kapag napapansin kong nahihirapan ang mga bata, binabago ko ang paraan ng pagtuturo*” (P3). Another noted, “*Mahalaga ang pag-encourage sa mga bata para hindi sila matakot magkamali*” (P6). A third participant stated, “*Ang positibong pakikitungo ay malaking tulong para manatiling interesado ang mga mag-aaral*” (P9). These responses reflect the role of teacher support in sustaining engagement.

Interpretation of this theme indicates that teacher agency and responsiveness were crucial in creating a safe and motivating learning environment. Studies on elementary pedagogy highlight that supportive teacher–learner relationships and adaptive instruction enhance engagement and promote inclusive learning experiences.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learner-centered pedagogy effectively enhances classroom engagement by promoting active participation, meaningful learning, and supportive classroom climates. When instructional practices prioritize interaction, collaboration, and learner agency, students are more likely to demonstrate behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. This outcome aligns with constructivist perspectives which posit that learning is most effective when learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction and meaningful experiences (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1970). Empirical studies further confirm that learner-centered strategies such as cooperative learning, inquiry-based tasks, and contextualized activities significantly improve learner motivation, participation, and depth of understanding (Fredricks et al., 2004; Prince & Felder, 2006; Hattie, 2009). By connecting lessons to learners’ lived experiences, teachers make learning more relevant and authentic, which strengthens emotional engagement and supports sustained interest in classroom activities (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992).

Teacher adaptability emerged as a critical factor in sustaining learner engagement, particularly in classrooms characterized by diverse abilities, interests, and learning needs. Responsive instructional adjustments, including pacing modifications, differentiated tasks, and varied instructional supports, enabled teachers to maintain learner attention and participation. This finding is supported by research emphasizing the role of reflective teaching and adaptive expertise in effective classroom practice (Schön, 1983; Tomlinson, 2014). Studies in elementary education indicate that teachers who continuously assess learner responses and adjust instruction accordingly create more inclusive and engaging learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Moreover, effective classroom management grounded in positive relationships and learner support has been shown to reinforce engagement by fostering a safe and encouraging atmosphere conducive to risk-taking and collaboration (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015). Given that engagement in the elementary years strongly influences long-term

learning trajectories and academic outcomes, learner-centered pedagogy supported by reflective practice and responsive classroom management offers a sustainable pathway for inclusive and effective teaching (Hattie, 2009; Fredricks et al., 2004).

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study provides empirical evidence that learner-centered pedagogy plays a significant role in enhancing classroom engagement at the elementary level by creating learning environments that actively involve learners in the construction of knowledge. The findings indicate that when instruction is organized around collaborative learning, contextualized tasks, and supportive teaching practices, learners demonstrate higher levels of participation, sustained interest, and greater effort in completing classroom activities. At Mabanutan Elementary School, learner-centered strategies encouraged pupils to interact with peers, express ideas confidently, and relate lessons to their everyday experiences, thereby strengthening behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. These outcomes support the view that engagement is not merely a learner trait but a pedagogical outcome shaped by instructional design and teacher–learner interactions.

The findings carry important implications for instructional practice in elementary education. Teachers are encouraged to adopt interactive and context-based strategies such as group work, inquiry-oriented activities, and differentiated tasks that respond to learners' diverse needs and developmental levels. Such approaches help foster inclusive classrooms where all learners feel supported and motivated to participate. Additionally, the results highlight the importance of positive teacher–learner relationships and adaptive instruction in sustaining engagement, suggesting that effective classroom practice requires continuous reflection and responsiveness to learner feedback.

Implications for school leadership underscore the need to provide systematic support for the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy. School leaders play a critical role in creating conditions that enable teachers to innovate by providing access to professional development, collaborative planning opportunities, and instructional resources aligned with learner-centered approaches. Leadership support is particularly crucial in elementary schools, where engagement strongly influences early learning trajectories and long-term academic success.

Finally, this study opens directions for future research. Subsequent studies may examine learner engagement across multiple elementary schools to enhance the generalizability of findings or employ mixed-methods designs to integrate qualitative insights with quantitative measures of engagement and achievement. Future research may also explore the long-term effects of learner-centered pedagogy on learners' academic performance, motivation, and socio-emotional development, thereby deepening understanding of how learner-centered practices contribute to sustainable and effective elementary education.

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